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SUBJECT: NOMINATIONS FOR 2009 SECRETARY'S WOMEN OF COURAGE
AWARD

REF: STATE 99729

¶1. (SBU) Per Reftel, Embassy Baghdad is pleased to submit its list of nominees for the Secretary's 2008 Award for International Women of Courage, keyed to the priorities in the reference. Embassy Baghdad is submitting four (4) nominees, but understands that only three of them will be considered by G/IWI. All nominees have been informed of the Ambassador's intention to nominate them and are available to travel in March 2008. A list of nominees in rank order follows.

¶2. (SBU) First Priority: Saja Qaddoori Azeez

Date of Birth: 20 August, 1960

Country of Birth: Iraq

Citizenship: Iraqi

Job Title/association: Member of the Diyala Provincial Council (PC) and Member of the PC Security Committee

Address: 22 Almuallmein District, Baqubah, Iraq

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Justification: Saja Qaddoori Azeez may not be a very tall woman but she is certainly strong and has a habit of always smiling. Two years ago, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) kidnapped her husband. He was a law student at Diyala University and her friends say he was very proud of his wife and the work she was doing to support women in the province. Saja opened a woman's center in downtown Baqubah. Everyday when her husband left the University, he would call her at the woman's center and let her know he was on his way to pick her up. One day he called her to say he was on his way but he never arrived at the center. Very few members of the Provincial Council know very many details about the kidnapping of her husband. Most say they have not had any word about him in two years and it is very likely he was killed. When you meet Saja, it is nearly impossible to know she carries such a great burden from the grief of the loss of her husband. She throws herself into projects and is the only woman in the Provincial Council to sit on what is considered a hard science committee, security.

¶3. (SBU) Saja champions the necessity of women in the field of security especially in Diyala province, which has the highest number of female suicide bombers of any other province in Iraq. At a conference sponsored by the Multi-National Division North in Irbil in early June, Saja cornered an American General to insist he help get more women into the field of security. The General saw Saja again at

the first graduation of female Iraqi Police last month and he reminded her that she had pushed for more women and he was trying to help deliver that. Saja says the most important field which needs women in Diyala is the field of intelligence. She says they need women intelligence officers because that is the only way to break the AQI recruitment of females to carry out suicide attacks.

¶4. (SBU) Saja was very close with her father who raised her to value independence and to fight for fairness and righteousness. Both of her parents have passed away now and her sister helps Saja by watching her son while Saja goes to work. The Diyala Provincial Council has seen eight members assassinated since 2005 and two of those were women but that does not prevent Saja from consistently attending public events and encouraging women to speak out for their rights. Saja also lost a brother who was executed by Saddam Hussein in 1990 but her family did not find out until after the fall of Saddam. Saja and her family had always distanced themselves from the Ba'ath party and Saddam's regime. She used to work as a high school teacher and taught Arabic, and she was the only faculty member of the 55 teachers who was not a member of the Ba'ath party. She says many people treated her unfairly because she was a Shia and a member of the Independent party.

¶5. (SBU) Saja says after the fall of Saddam's regime, she set her mind to becoming the first female member of the Baqubah City Council. There were five seats within the Council's cabinet and only one of those seats was reserved for a female member. Saja became the first and only female

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member of the Baqubah City Council in 2004 and quickly saw the need to extend greater support and recognition to the women of Baqubah. She organized the first Women's Conference and had over 150 women attend from all over Iraq. The following year the provincial elections were held and Saja won a seat on the Provincial Council. As a member of the security committee, she began to receive death threats nearly daily and her family was also threatened. Nearly a year later, her husband was kidnapped and Saja took two months off from work. Saja used her grief to push herself even harder and returned to the Provincial Council more determined than ever that more had to be done in order to promote security throughout the province.

¶6. (SBU) Saja is working to improve the intelligence offices throughout the province and is ensuring they have better communication equipment to make them a viable force in the elimination of terrorism. This year Saja also assisted when tensions flared in Khanaqin between the Peshmerga (armed Kurdish forces) and the Iraqi Army. She traveled to Khanaqin to personally deliver a message to insist both sides remain calm and not engage. Saja brought the media along with her because she also understands how important it is to get the message out to the people. Tensions finally abated, but it was a volatile time to travel to that area.

¶7. (SBU) Unlike many political figures in the province, Saja is not afraid to attend open events or be seen on television. She says she is a daughter of Diyala and therefore a daughter of Iraq and people need to see that there is a future for her country. The other women of the Provincial Council look to Saja for her leadership on key issues. The women have formed an all-female caucus realizing they are stronger as a bloc than as members of their individual parties. During a recent boycott staged by the female members over unequal standards in comparison with the male members of the Provincial Council, it was Saja who managed to find a solution to the problem and encourage the women that it was time to return to work in order to help the people of Diyala.

¶8. (SBU) The next elections are just a few months away, and Saja says this is another opportunity to savor the democracy

of new Iraq. Although there are 12 fewer seats for the Diyala Provincial Council this year, women must still make up a percentage of the Council and Saja is hopeful she will have an opportunity to continue her work with security and women's issues in the province. The Provincial Council Chairman believes Saja is one of only three female members he feels should be re-elected for the excellent work she has done in the last three years. According to Saja, the women of the Provincial Council are closer than sisters despite their religious differences. One member of the Provincial Council described Diyala as a wounded province, and Saja herself is also wounded from the great loss of her husband but it is inspiring to see both going through the healing process and becoming stronger and more secure. Saja is a fighter and will continue to work for the betterment of her home even if she does not get re-elected.

¶9. (SBU) Second Priority: Suaad Abbas Salman Al-Lami
Full Legal Name: Suaad Abbas Salman Al-Lami
Job title/association: Lawyer, Director, Legal Center for Supporting Women
Sadr City, Baghdad, Iraq
Date of birth: March 1, 1967
Country of birth: Iraq
Citizenship: Iraqi
Address: Muhalla 557, Alley 55, House 1/8, Sadr City, Baghdad, Iraq
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Passport number: G1187657

Justification: On International Women's Day 2008, the Embassy of Japan in Iraq awarded a Grassroots Grant to our nominee Suaad Al-Lami, the founder of the Women For Progress Non-Governmental Organization, to purchase an ultrasound machine for her Sadr City Women's Center, the most comprehensive of its kind, Offering medical exams, domestic violence counseling, literacy education, vocational training,

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child care, exercise opportunities and legislative advocacy, the Center, as well as her all-female Women's Legal Clinic in Sadr City, are the creative offspring of this diminutive but increasingly prominent female lawyer and women's rights advocate. The women's Center is the third stage in her ambitious and courageous plan set in motion to elevate the status of women in Iraq. Her two Women Lawyers Continuing Education seminars, held in February and July 2008, were the first ever in Iraq and attracted 99 women lawyers from across Baghdad. These training events, critical to helping Iraqi women lawyers compete in a male dominated legal system, are necessary adjuncts to leveling the playing field for Iraqi women. This pioneer is developing program content for her independent radio show "Ask A Woman" to be broadcast from Sadr City.

¶10. (SBU) Her focus on women is not of recent vintage. She has been in the trenches for women's rights in Iraq for years, walking a tightrope between championing women and not becoming a target to those culturally indisposed to strong and vocal females looking for an equal place at the social altar. More compelling and unlike other Iraqi women activists advocating from the safer confines of Jordan or abroad, her advocacy is rooted in her Sadr City home turf. She believes that Iraq needs to rely on talented women who make up a majority of the population yet are only a small fraction of its workforce, especially in the professional arena. She recognizes that, although Iraqi women have had certain Constitutional rights, these often prove insufficient to permit women to strive for and actually enjoy the same opportunities and quality of life as men. On the national political scene, only a few of the Cabinet Ministries are held by women. Women remain only a tiny fraction of the country's judiciary, shortcomings she is targeting.

¶11. (SBU) Despite threats and intimidation in the belly of

Al Sadr, she is determined to press her agenda. She is that strong and credible advocate Iraqi women need to ensure that equality is not only talked about but practiced and upheld in ground truth. She toils in relative obscurity in stark contrast to the brilliance of what she has done and where she works. She remains the only woman on the 40 person Sadr City District Council, serving as Chair of its Women and Children Committee since 2004. She previously served on the Baghdad Provincial Council from 2004 to 2005. She authored the January 2008 By-Laws for all Baghdad Province District and Qada Councils. She resisted, at great risk to her life, an effort by a Sadr City power broker to extort her Women's Center program, choosing instead to cancel the initial program rather than yield to the strong arm tactics.

Agreeing to a request from UNAMI to head its August 2008 humanitarian food distribution drive in Sadr City, she intervened in an effort by another DC member to steal the supplies. In May 2008 she was selected from over 60 applicants Iraq-wide for funding under the Ambassador's Targeted Development Program. Her proposal to provide 18,000 Sadr City schoolchildren with uniforms was approved for USD 1,800,000. Another proposal to create four more women's centers, modeled after her Sadr City effort, in the Adhamiyah area of Baghdad was approved for USD 700,000. She has filed proposals with US-funded entities to teach internationally recognized human rights to all of the Baghdad District Councils and human rights to militia age males, taught by strong women role models, as a deterrent to violent thinking.

¶12. (SBU) She has consistently been a moderate and reasoned voice on the Sadr City District Council. She has engaged frequently with US Government and Coalition Forces, in public, in and outside the Green Zone, at great personal risk. On May 12, 2008, in cooperation with a female Sunni Member of Iraq's Parliament, she conducted an unannounced inspection of the Kadhamiya Women's Prison, long reputed to be a chamber of human rights abuses. Controversy followed her troubling published findings. The Prison was recently in the process of being closed by the Minister of Human Rights.

¶13. (SBU) She has been a practicing lawyer in Iraqi courts for 16 years. Though Sadr City born and bred, she remains open to ideas and different perspectives in the most difficult ideological and cultural terrain. She recently

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declined a request from the Sadrist bloc to run in the provincial elections. Owing to her moderate views she also recently entertained a request from a minority Sunni party to so run. She will continue to convince the government and political parties that women are underutilized and must be embraced if Iraq is to be taken seriously on the world stage.

This unassuming and well-respected figure in the legal and women's rights communities in Baghdad is a rising star whose potential to effect change and impact women's rights Iraq wide is limited only by threats and intimidation.

¶14. (SBU) Third Priority: Najat Shakir Munshid al-Hameedawi
Full Legal Name: Najat Shakir Munshid al-Hameedawi
Job title/association: Member of the Baghdad Suburban Services Board, Istiqlal Qada (District) Council, and Husseiniya Nahia (Sub-district) Council; Ms. Najat serves on numerous committees of local government and is an active member of Iraq's civil society community, including as the head of the Istiqlal Organization for Women Development and Training.

Date of birth: 15 June 1967

Country of Birth: Iraq

Citizenship: Iraq

Address: Husseiniya, Iraq

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Passport number: G1465206

Justification: Ms. Najat, Istiqlal District Council member and grassroots community activist, is a familiar face to the

ePRTs and battalion maneuver units with responsibility for the rural areas of Baghdad province outside the city gates. Since the fall of the old regime in 2003 she has advocated for women's rights, peace and reconciliation, and better services for her constituents. While she has received at least 13 certificates of appreciation or letters of recommendation from U.S. agencies, her greatest admirers are inevitably at the local level, outside the spotlight. These include military commanders who see her defend her rights across the table from influential sheikhs, ePRT advisors who have seen her develop detailed bylaws for the women's organization she heads, and the USAID and DRL partners whose training programs she tirelessly pursues to better herself in her duties. Ms. Najat has never wavered in her democratic cause or her support for the Coalition Forces that share that cause even in the face of extreme danger to herself and her family.

¶15. (SBU) Ms. Najat,s day job on the Istiqlal district council and Husseiniya sub-district council includes leadership positions on the district,s Women & Children,s Committee and four sub-district committees. At the provincial level, she serves as the Istiqlal representative to the Baghdad Suburban Services Board (BSSB) and the chair of the Women & Children,s Committee for all of the rural districts of Baghdad. Her commitment to grassroots governance provides a stark contrast with a Baghdad PC that is often dominated by the interests of national level religious parties over constituent concerns. This problem is particularly acute in the rural areas whereas the services of Baghdad City are managed by a ministerial-level municipality, the rural districts are overseen by much weaker local councils. In the face of these structural barriers, in her role on the BSSB, she advocates as hard and effectively for her own Shia areas just north of Sadr City as for the Sunni areas to the West and South of Baghdad. Ms. Najat's efforts are thus addressing a key link in the counterinsurgency fight to support the population in these strategically important Baghdad belts. As Baghdad governance and bottom-up reconciliation are essential to the U.S. mission in Iraq, her commitment to deliver services to her constituents deserves the highest recognition.

¶16. (SBU) Outside her official duties, Ms. Najat founded the Istiqlal Organization for Women Development and Training intended to strengthen the role of women in Iraq,s democracy. She has received training in this arena both from the International Republican Institute in Sulaymaniah and from the Afro-Asian Lawyers Federation in Cairo. She has also played an oversight role in Iraqi elections for the Constitution and for the Council of Representatives in 2005. One of her biggest goals is to develop an acceptance of a

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strong role for women in leadership within the Iraqi cultural traditions, for example, through tribal sheikhs providing public support for women candidates in this year,s Iraqi elections.

¶17. (SBU) But what truly makes Ms. Najat,s achievements and tireless efforts amazing is her incredible story of courage. Ms. Najat put her life and that of her family in danger on a daily basis by working for the Government of Iraq and with Coalition Forces. She risked her life further by speaking up for her strongly held ideas of democracy and women,s rights and against the terrorist groups and sectarian militias who do not want to see a stronger role for women in Iraqi society. The terrorist threat became reality on a Friday in the winter of 2006, when Ms. Najat was violently dragged from her home in front of her family by a gang of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups militia. She was tortured and brought to trial in one of the Sharia courts operated by JAM and sentenced to death. However, on her way to execution, she convinced her executioner that she was innocent and to let her go for the sake of her small children. Her executioner was persuaded and released her with strict instructions to

leave Baghdad and Iraq.

¶18. (SBU) Ms. Najat refused to leave following her release.

Since the kidnapping she has divided her family so they live with relatives in three different cities throughout Iraq and she can continue to work for her community, for democracy, and for her country. The threat has not diminished and yet she continues to carry out her official duties and has only increased her activism and fight for women's rights. As she stated, the danger is not over, "But I still want to work and prove something to Iraq and to put my fingerprint on the work to serve the Iraqi people." Ms. Najat's dedication to her native Iraq and to building a free country for her children and future generations despite those dangers and threats to her and her family are a true testament to her courage, patriotism, and devotion to duty. Ms. Najat was notified that she was being nominated and confirmed her willingness to accept the award and travel to Washington DC.

¶19. (SBU) Fourth Priority: Wijdan Michael Shamo Salim

Full Legal Name: Wijdan Michael Shamo Salim

Job title: Minister of Human Rights, Government of Iraq

Date of Birth: December 20, 1962

Country of Birth: Iraq

Citizenship: Iraqi

Address: International Zone, Baghdad, Iraq

Telephone: 9647901111162

Email: wmyousif@gmail.com, wmyousif@yahoo.com

Passport number: D1000574

Justification: In Wijdan Salim's two years as the Iraqi Minister of Human Rights, she has worked tirelessly to transform her ministry into an effective and functioning body. The ministry has previously struggled to fulfill its mandate in the face of unstable security situations, but Ms. Salim has transformed it into a key institution within the Government of Iraq. She is a powerful and courageous proponent for human rights, and her voice has brought greater and much needed attention to human rights issues in Iraq.

¶20. (SBU) She works with international organizations, local NGOs, and foreign missions to ensure that her ministry and

human rights officials in other GOI branches receive essential human rights training. She is very active in ensuring government policies and legislation meet and are implemented according to human rights standards. She has led her ministry to increase mass grave investigations and pursue related criminal cases, improve detention facilities and detainee lives, and improve the lives of religious and ethnic minorities. As a member of a minority group in Iraq herself, Ms. Salim takes a strong interest in understanding the realities of the situation, the greatest needs of the minorities, and possible government solutions. She is committed to improving human rights in Iraq and leading Iraq to become an example for the region.

¶21. (SBU) Within the government, Ms. Salim has fought every day to defend human rights in government policies and actions. She has faced significant obstacles, including

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continuous threats on her and her family's life, but she has never backed down. As a female, religious minority, and political independent, she has overcome many difficulties to get to such a high position. She is one of the most outspoken members of the cabinet, often inciting anger, but she has earned the respect of the predominantly male government. Ms. Salim has not allowed the government to ignore human rights and is now involved in almost every major political issue facing Iraq. She is one of the Embassy's core allies in the GOI and is always willing to work with the Embassy and the Military on various human rights causes, particularly in improving the detention systems and protecting the rights of vulnerable populations.

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